

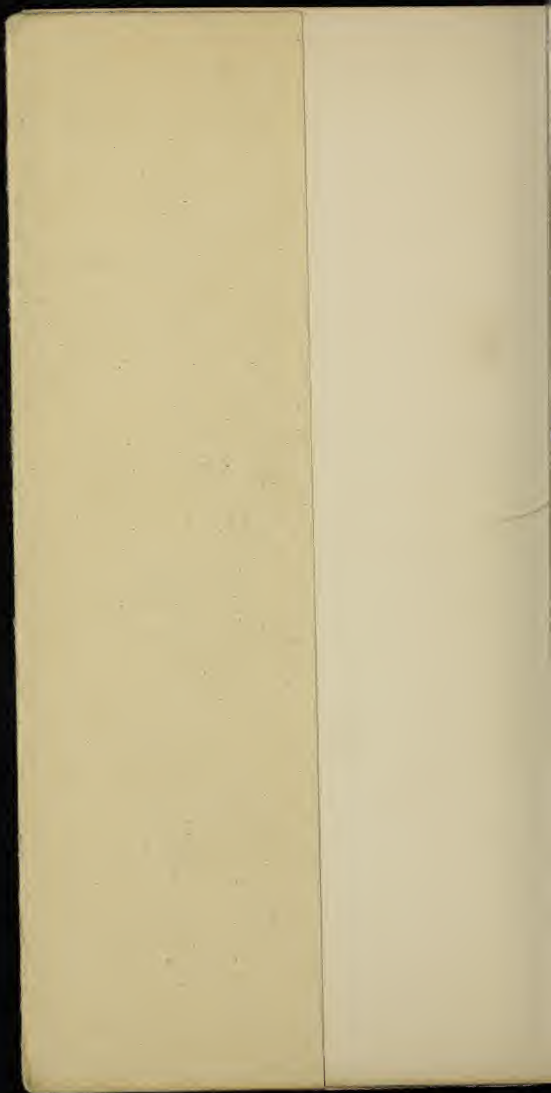
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THE LEAF OF OLIVE

BY
Maurice Maeterlinck

TRANSLATED BY
Alexander Teixeira de Mattos



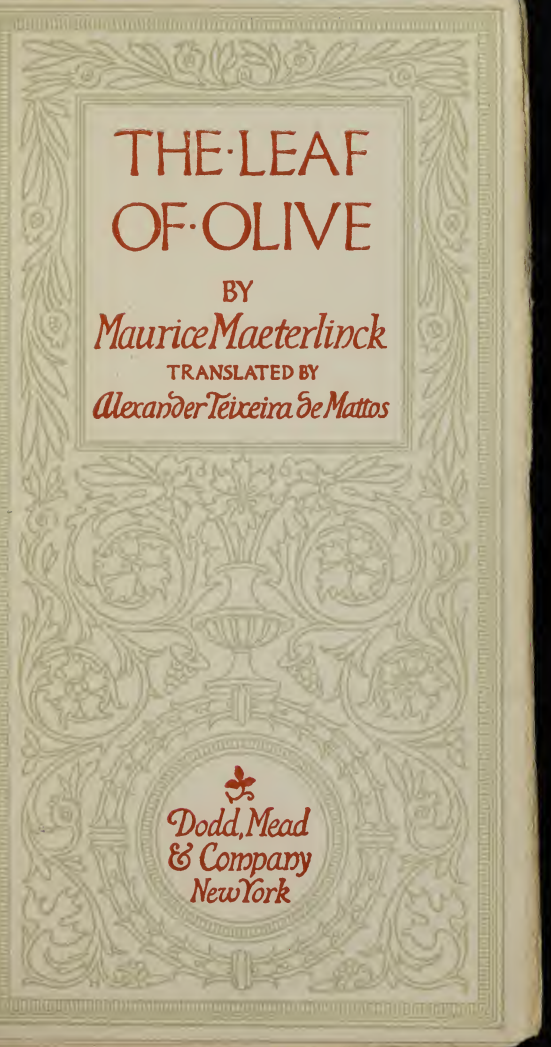




To

With the Season's Greetings
From





THE LEAF OF OLIVE

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New York*

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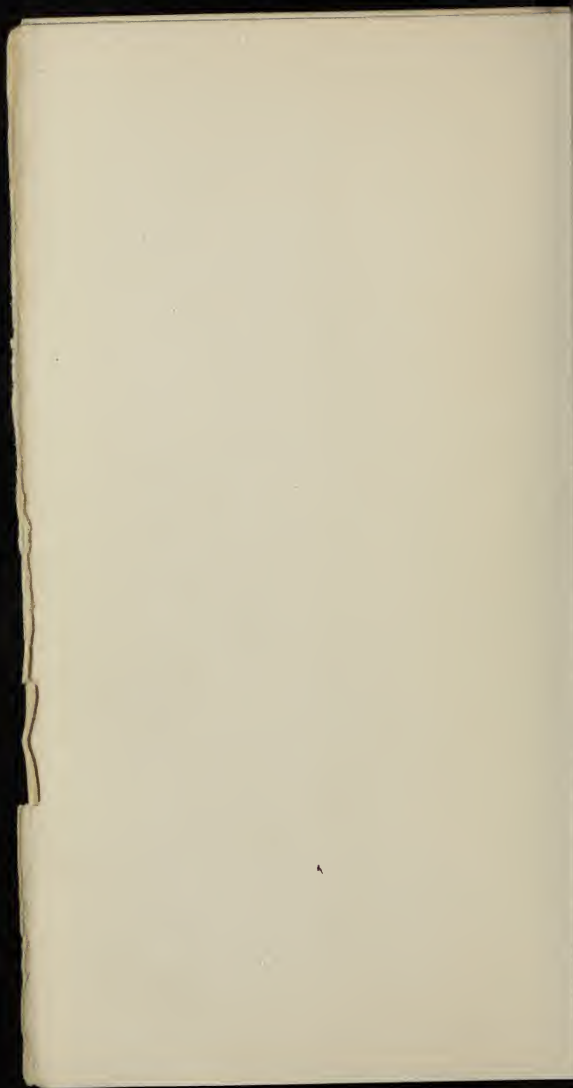
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THE LEAF OF OLIVE

I



LET us not forget that we live in pregnant and decisive times. It is probable that our descendants will envy us the dawn through which, without knowing it, we are passing, just as we envy those who took part in the age of Pericles, in the most glorious days of Roman greatness and in certain hours of the Italian Renaissance. The splendid dust that clouds the great movements of men shines brightly in the memory, but blinds those who raise it and breathe it, hiding from them the direction of their road and,

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

above all, the thought, the necessity or the instinct that leads them.

It concerns us to take account of this. The web of daily life varies little throughout the centuries in which men have attained a certain facility of existence. This web, in which the surface occupied by boons and evils remains much the same, shows through it either light or dark according to the predominant idea of the generation that unfolds it. And, whatever its form or its disguise may be, this idea always reduces itself, in the ultimate issue, to a certain conception of the universe. Private or public calamity and prosperity have but a fleeting influence on the happiness and unhappiness of man-

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

kind, so long as they do not modify the general ideas with which it is nurtured and enlightened on the subject of its gods, of infinity, of the great unknown and of the world's economy. Hence, we must seek there, rather than in wars and civil troubles, if we would know whether a generation have passed in darkness or in light, in distress or in joyfulness. There we see why one people, which underwent many reverses, has left us numberless evidences of beauty and of gladness, whereas another, which was naturally rich or often victorious, has bequeathed to us only the monuments of a dull and awe-struck life.

II

WE are emerging (to speak only of the last three or four centuries of our present civilization), we are emerging from the great religious period. During this period, despite the hopes laid beyond the tomb, human life stood out against a somewhat gloomy and threatening background. This background allowed the thousand mobile and diversely shaded curtains of art and metaphysics to intervene pretty freely between the last men and its faded folds. Its existence was to some extent forgotten. It no longer appeared in view save at the hour of the great rifts. Nevertheless, it always existed

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

in the immanent state, giving a uniform color to the atmosphere and the landscape and giving to human life a diffuse meaning which proposed a sort of provisional patience upon questions that were too pressing.

To-day, this background is disappearing in tatters. What is there in its place to give a visible form, a new meaning to the horizon?

The fallacious axis upon which humanity believed itself to revolve has suddenly snapped in two; and the huge platform which carries mankind, after swaying for some time in our alarmed imaginations, has quietly settled itself again to turning on the real pivot that had always supported it. Nothing is changed except one of those

unexplained phrases with which we cover the things which we do not understand. Hitherto, the pivot of the world seemed to us to be made up of spiritual forces ; to-day, we are convinced that it is composed of purely material energies. We flatter ourselves that a great revolution has been accomplished in the kingdom of truth. As a matter of fact, there has been, in the republic of our ignorance, but a permutation of epithets, a sort of verbal *coup d'État*, the words "mind" and "matter" being no more than the interchangeable attributes of the same unknown.

III

BUT if it be true that, in themselves, these epithets should have merely a literary value, since both are probably inaccurate and no more represent reality than the epithet "Atlantic" or "Pacific" represents the ocean to which it is applied, they do, nevertheless, according as we adhere exclusively to the first or to the second, exercise a prodigious influence over our future, over our morality and, consequently, over our happiness. We wander round the truth, with no other guide than hypotheses which light, by way of torches, some famous, but magic phrases, and soon those phrases become

for us so many living entities, which place themselves at the head of our physical, intellectual and moral activity. If we believe that mind directs the universe, all our researches and all our hopes are concentrated upon our own mind, or rather upon its verbal and imaginative faculties and we become addicted to theology and metaphysics. If we are persuaded that the last word of the riddle lies in matter, we apply ourselves exclusively to interrogating this and we place our confidence in experimental science only. We are beginning, however, to recognize that "materialism" and "spiritualism" are merely the two opposite, but identical names of our impotent labor after comprehension. Never-

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

theless, each of the two methods
drags us into a moral world that
seems to belong to a different
planet.

IV

LET us pass over the accessory consequences. The great advantage of the spiritualistic interpretation is that it gives to our life a morality, an aim and a meaning that are imaginary, but very much superior to those which our cultivated instincts proffer to it. The more or less unbelieving spiritualism of to-day still draws light from the reflection of that advantage and preserves a deep, though somewhat shapeless faith in the final supremacy and the indeterminate triumph of the mind.

The other interpretation, on the contrary, offers us no morality, no ideal superior to our instinct, no aim situate outside

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

ourselves and no horizon other than space. Or else, if we could derive a morality from the only synthetic theory that has sprung from the innumerable experimental and fragmentary statements which form the imposing but dumb mass of the conquests of science, I mean the theory of evolution, it would be the horrible and monstrous morality of nature, that is to say, the adaptation of the species to the environment, the triumph of the strongest and all the crimes necessary to the struggle of life. Now this morality, which does, in the meanwhile, appear to be another certainty, the essential morality of all earthly life, since it inspires the actions of agile and ephemeral man as well as the slow move-

ments of the undying crystals : this morality would soon become fatal to mankind if it were practiced to an extreme. All religions, all philosophies, the counsels of gods and wise men have had no other object than to introduce into this overheated environment, which, if it were pure, would probably dissolve our species, elements that should reduce its virulence. These were, more particularly, a belief in just and dread gods, a hope of reward and a fear of eternal punishment. There were also neutral matters and antidotes, for which, with a somewhat curious foresight, nature had reserved a place in our own hearts : I mean goodness, pity, a sense of justice.

Wherefore, this intolerant and

exclusive environment, which was to be our natural and normal environment, was never and probably never will be pure. Be this as it may, the state in which it is to-day offers a strange and noteworthy spectacle. It is fretting, bubbling and being precipitated like a fluid into which chance has let fall a few drops of some unknown reagent. The compensating principles which religion had added to it are gradually evaporating and being eliminated at the top, while at the bottom they are coagulating into a thick and inactive mass. But, in proportion as these disappear, the purely human antidotes, although oxidized through and through by the elimination of the religious elements, gain

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

greater vigor and seem to exert themselves to maintain the standard of the mixture in which the human species is being cultivated by an obscure destiny. Pending the arrival of as yet mysterious auxiliaries, they occupy the place abandoned by the evaporating forces.

V

Is it not surprising, at the outset, that, in spite of the decrease of religious feeling and the influence which this decrease must needs have upon human reason, which no longer sees any supernatural interest in doing good, while the natural interest in doing good is fairly disputable : is it not surprising that the sum of justice and goodness and the quality of the general conscience, far from diminishing, have incontestably, increased? I say incontestably, although doubtless the fact will be contested. To establish it, we should have to review all history, or, at the very least, that of the last few centuries,

compare the position of those who were unhappy formerly with that of those who are unhappy now, place beside the sum total of the injustice of yesterday the sum total of the injustice of to-day, contrast the state of the serf, the semi-serf, the peasant, the laborer, under the old systems of government, with the condition of our working man, set the indifference, the unconsciousness, the easy and harsh certainty of those who possessed the land in former days against the sympathy, the self-reproachful restlessness, the scruples of those who possess the land to-day. All this would demand a detailed and very long study ; but I think that any fair mind will, without difficulty, allow that there is, notwith-

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

standing the existence of too much real and wide-spread wretchedness, a little more justice, solidarity, sympathy and hope, not only in the wishes of men—for thus much seems certain—but in very deed. . . .

To what religion, to what thoughts, to what new elements are we to attribute this illogical improvement in our moral atmosphere? It is difficult] to state precisely; for, though it is certain that they are beginning to act in a very perceptible manner, they are still too recent, too shapeless, too unsettled for us to qualify them.

VI

LET us, nevertheless, try to pick out a few clues ; and let us state, in the first place, that our conception of the universe has been greatly and most effectively modified and, above all, that it is tending to become modified more and more rapidly. Without our accounting for it, each of the numerous discoveries of science—whether affecting history, anthropology, geography, geology, medicine, physics, chemistry, astronomy or the rest—changes our accustomed atmosphere and adds some essential thing to an image which we do not yet distinguish, but which we see looming above us, occupying the whole horizon,

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

and which we feel, by a presentiment, to be enormous. Its features are straggling, like those illuminations which we see at evening fêtes. A frontal, colonnade, cupola and portico, all incoherent, appear abruptly in the sky. We do not know what they mean, to what they belong. They hang absurdly in the motionless ether; they are inconsistent dreams in the still firmament. But, suddenly, a little line of light meanders across the blue, and, in the twinkling of an eye, connects the cupola with the columns, the portico with the frontal, the steps with the ground; and the unexpected edifice, as though flinging aside a mask of darkness, stands affirmed and explicit in the night.

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

It is this little line of light, this deciding undulation, this flash of general and complementary fire that is still lacking in the night of our intelligence. But we feel that it exists, that it is there, outlined in shadow in the darkness, and that a mere nothing, a spark issuing from we know not what science will be enough to light it and to give an infallible and exact sense to our immense presentiments and to all the scattered notions that seem to stray through unfathomable space.

VII

MEANWHILE, this space—the abode of our ignorance—which, after the disappearance of the religious ideas, had appeared frightfully empty, is gradually becoming peopled with vague, but enormous figures. Each time that one of these new forms uprises, the boundless extent in which it comes to move increases in proportions that are boundless in their turn; for the limits of boundlessness evolve in our imagination without ceasing. Assuredly, the gods who conceived certain positive religions were sometimes very great. The Jewish and Christian God, for instance, declared Himself

incommensurable, containing all things, and His first attributes were eternity and infinity. But the infinite is an abstract and tenebrous notion which assumes life and is explained only by the displacing of frontiers which we thrust back further and further into the finite. It constitutes a formless extent of which we can acquire a consciousness only with the aid of a few phenomena that start up on points more or less distant from the centre of our imagination. It is efficacious only through the multiplicity of the, so to speak, tangible and positive faces of the unknown which it reveals to us in its depths. It does not become comprehensible and perceptible to us until it shows animation and movement and kin-

dles on the several horizons of space questions more and more distant, more and more foreign to all our uncertainties. For our life to take part in its life, the infinite must question us incessantly and incessantly place us in the presence of the infinity of our ignorance, which is the only visible garment beneath which it allows us to conjecture the infinity of its existence.

Now the most incommensurable gods hardly put questions similar to those which are endlessly put to us by that which their adorers call the void, which is, in reality, nature. They were content to reign in a dead space, without events and without images, consequently without points of reference for our imagination, and having only an

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

immutable and immobile influence over our thoughts and feelings. Thus, our sense of the finite, which is the source of all higher activity, became atrophied within us. Our intelligence, in order to live on the confines of itself, where it accomplishes its loftiest mission, our thought, in order to fill the whole space of our brain, needs to be continually excited by fresh recallings of the unknown. So soon as it ceases to be daily summoned to the extremity of its own strength by some new fact—and there are hardly any new facts in the reign of the gods—it falls asleep, contracts, gives way and sinks into decay. One thing alone is capable of dilating equally, in all their parts, all the lobes of our head,

and that is the active idea which we conceive of the riddle in the midst of which we have our being. Is there danger of error in declaring that never was the activity of this idea comparable with that of to-day? Never before, neither at the time when the Hindoo, Jewish or Christian theology flourished, nor in the days when Greek or German metaphysics were engaging all the forces of human genius, was our conception of the universe enlivened, enriched and broadened by proofs so unexpected, so laden with mystery, so energetic, so real. Until now, it was fed on indirect nourishment, so to speak, or rather it fed illusively on itself. It inflated itself with its own breath, sprinkled itself with its own

waters, and very little came to it from without. To-day, the universe itself is beginning to penetrate into the conception which we form of it. The diet of our thought is changed. That which it takes comes from outside itself and adds to its substance. It borrows instead of lending. It no longer sheds around itself the reflection of its own greatness, but absorbs the greatness around it. Until now, we had been prosing, with the aid of our infirm logic or our idle imagination, on the subject of the riddle; to-day, issuing from our too inward abode, we are trying to enter into relations with the riddle itself. It questions us, and we stammer as best we may. We put questions to it, and, in reply, it unmasks, at

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

moments, a luminous and boundless perspective in the immense circle of darkness amid which we move. We were, it might be said, like blind men who should imagine the outer world from inside a shut room. Now, we are those same blind men whom an ever-silent guide leads by turns into the forest, across the plain, on the mountain and beside the sea. Their eyes have not yet opened ; but their shaking and eager hands are able to feel the trees, to rumple the spikes of corn, to gather a flower or a fruit, to marvel at the ridge of a rock or to mingle with the cool waves, while their ears learn to distinguish, without needing to understand, the thousand real songs of the sun and the shade, the wind and the rain, the leaves and the waters.

VIII

IF our happiness, as we said above, depends upon our conception of the universe, this is, in a great measure, because our morality depends upon it. And our morality depends much less upon the nature than upon the size of that conception. We should be better, nobler, more moral in the midst of a universe proved to be without morality, but conceived on an infinite scale, than in a universe which attained the perfection of the human ideal, but which appeared to us circumscribed and devoid of mystery. It is, before all, important to make as vast as possible the place in which are developed all our thoughts and

all our feelings; and this place is none other than that in which we picture the universe. We are unable to move except within the idea which we create for ourselves of the world in which we move. Everything starts from that, everything flows from it; and all our acts, most often unknown to ourselves, are modified by the height and the breadth of that immense well of force which exists at the summit of our conscience.

IX

I THINK that we may say that never was that well larger nor more highly placed. Certainly, the idea which we shape for ourselves of the organization and government of the infinite powers is less precise than heretofore; but this is for the good and noble reason that it no longer admits of falsely-defined conventional limits. It no longer contains any fixed morality, any consolation, any promise, any certain hope. It is bare and almost empty, because nothing subsists in it that is not the very bed-rock of some primitive facts. It no longer has a voice, it no longer has images, except to proclaim and

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

illustrate its immensity. Outside that, it no longer tells us anything; but this immensity, having remained its sole imperious and irrefutable attribute, surpasses in energy, nobility and eloquence all the attributes, all the virtues and perfections with which we had hitherto peopled our unknown. It lays no duty upon us, but it maintains us in a state of greatness that will permit us more easily and more generously to perform all those duties which await us on the threshold of a coming future. By bringing us nearer to our true place in the system of the worlds, it adds to our spiritual and general life all that it takes away from our material and individual importance. The more it makes us recognize our little-

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

ness, the greater grows that within us which recognizes this littleness. A new being, more disinterested and probably closer to that which is one day to proclaim itself the last truth, is gradually taking the place of the original being which is being dissolved in the conception that overwhelms it.

X

To this new being, itself and all the men around it now represent only so inconsiderable a speck in the infinity of the eternal forces that they are no longer able to fix its attention and its interests. Our brothers, our immediate descendants, our visible neighbor, all that but lately marked the limit of our sympathies, are gradually yielding precedence to a more inordinate and loftier being. We are almost nothing; but the species to which we belong occupies a place that can be recognized in the boundless ocean of life. Though we no longer count, the humanity of which we form a part is acquir-

ing the importance of which we are being stripped. This feeling, which is only beginning to make its way in the accustomed atmosphere of our thoughts and of our unconsciousness, is already fashioning our morality and is doubtless preparing revolutions as great as those wrought in it by the most subversive religions. It will gradually displace the centre of most of our virtues and vices. It will substitute for an illusory and individual ideal a disinterested, unlimited and yet tangible ideal, of which it is not yet possible to foresee the consequences and the laws. But, whatever these may be, we can state even now that they will be even more general and more decisive than any of those which preceded

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

them in the superior and, so to speak, astral history of mankind. In any case, it can hardly be denied that the object of this ideal is more lasting and, above all, more certain than the best of those which lightened our darkness before it, since it coalesces on more than one point with the object of the universe itself.

XI

AND we are just at the moment when a thousand new reasons for having confidence in the destinies of our kind are being born around us. For hundreds and hundreds of centuries we have occupied this earth; and the greatest dangers seem past. They were so threatening that we have escaped them only by a chance that cannot occur more than once in a thousand times in the history of the worlds. The earth, still too young, was poisoning its continents, its islands and its seas before fixing them. The central fire, the first master of the planet, was at every moment bursting from its granite prison; and the globe,

hesitating in space, wandered among greedy and hostile stars ignorant of their laws. Our undetermined faculties floated blindly in our bodies, like the *nebulæ* in the ether; a mere nothing could have destroyed our human future at the groping hours when our brain was forming itself, when the network of our nerves was branching out. To-day, the instability of the seas and the uprisings of the central fire are infinitely less to be feared; in any case, it is unlikely that they will bring about any more universal catastrophes. As for the third peril, collision with a stray star, we may be permitted to believe that we shall be granted the few centuries of respite necessary for us to learn how to ward it off. When we

see what we have done and what we are on the point of doing, it is not absurd to hope that one day we shall lay hold of that essential secret of the worlds which, for the time being and to soothe our ignorance (even as we soothe a child and lull it to sleep by repeating to it meaningless and monotonous words), we have called the law of gravitation. There is nothing mad in supposing that the secret of this sovereign force lies hidden within us, or around us, within reach of our hand. It is perhaps tractable and docile, even as light and electricity; it is perhaps wholly spiritual and depends upon a very simple cause which the displacing of an object may reveal to us. The discovery of an unexpected prop-

THE LEAF OF OLIVE

erty of matter, analogous to that which has just disclosed to us the disconcerting qualities of radium, may lead us straight to the very sources of the energy and the life of the stars ; and from that moment man's lot would be changed and the earth, definitely saved, would become eternal. It would, at our pleasure, draw closer to or further from the centres of heat and light, it would flee from worn-out suns and go in search of unsuspected fluids, forces and lives in the orbit of virgin and inexhaustible worlds.

XII

I GRANT that all this is full of questionable hopes and that it would be almost as reasonable to despair of the destinies of man. But, already, it is much that the choice remains possible and that, hitherto, nothing has been decided against us. Every hour that passes increases our chances of holding out and conquering. It may be said, I know, that, from the point of view of beauty, enjoyment and the harmonious understanding of life, some nations—the Greeks and the Romans of the commencement of the Empire, for instance—were superior to ourselves. The fact none the less remains that the sum total

of civilization spread over our globe was never to be compared with that of to-day. An extraordinary civilization, such as that of Athens, Rome or Alexandria, formed but a luminous islet which was threatened on every side and which ended by being swallowed up by the savage ocean that surrounded it. Nowadays—apart from the Yellow Peril, which does not seem serious—it is no longer possible for a barbarian invasion to make us lose in a few days our essential conquests. The barbarians can no longer come from without: they would issue from our fields and our cities, from the shallow waters of our own life; they would be saturated with the civilization which they would lay claim to destroy; and it is

only by making use of its conquests that they would succeed in depriving us of its fruits. There would, therefore, at the worst, be but a halt, followed by a redistribution of riches.

Since we have a choice of two interpretations, forming a background of light or of shade for our existence, it would be unwise to hesitate. Even in the most trivial circumstances . . . of life, our ignorance very often offers us only a choice of the same kind, and one which does not impose itself more strongly. Optimism thus understood is in no way devout or childish; it does not rejoice stupidly like a peasant leaving the inn; but it strikes a balance between what has taken and what can take place, between hopes and fears,

and, if the last be not heavy enough, it throws in the weight of life.

For the rest, this choice is not even necessary: it is enough that we should feel conscious of the greatness of our expectation. For we are in the magnificent state in which Michael Angelo painted the prophets and the just men of the Old Testament, on that prodigious ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: we are living in expectation and perhaps in the last moments of expectation. Expectation, in fact, has degrees which begin with a sort of vague resignation and which do not yet hope for the thrill aroused by the nearest movements of the expected object. It seems as though we heard those movements: the sound of superhu-

man footsteps, an enormous door opening, a breath caressing us, or light coming; we do not know; but expectation at this pitch is an ardent and marvelous state of life, the fairest period of happiness, its youth, its childhood. . . .

I repeat, we never had so many good reasons for hope. Let us cherish them. Our predecessors were sustained by slighter reasons when they did the great things that have remained for us the best evidence of the destinies of mankind. They had confidence when they found none but unreasonable reasons for having it. To-day, when some of those reasons really spring from reason, it would be wrong to show less courage than did those who derived theirs from

the very circumstances whence we derive only our discouragements.

We no longer believe that this world is as the apple of the eye of one God who is alive to our slightest thoughts ; but we know that it is subjected to forces quite as powerful, quite as alive to laws and duties which it behoves us to penetrate. That is why our attitude in the face of the mystery of these forces has changed. It is no longer one of fear, but one of boldness. It no longer demands that the slave shall kneel before the master or the creator, but permits a gaze as between equals, for we bear within ourselves the equal of the deepest and greatest mysteries.





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